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SUBJECT: Through Israeli Eyes Only: Gaza journalists on the media and disengagement

Classified by DCM Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In separate conversations with EMBOFF on 25 August, three Gaza journalists gave similar reasons for what they described as the "Israeli-only" media coverage of disengagement. Fear of kidnapping, as in the case of the French journalist seized on 15 August and freed on 22 August, kept foreign journalists out of Palestinian areas and prompted Palestinian journalists to self-censorship; Palestinian officials were not used to managing the media; and Palestinian journalists did not have access to the Israeli settlements. Looking to increase the independence of Palestinian media, the journalists mused on activism, diversity in media outlets, and training as possible approaches. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) "The international media focused on the feelings of the settlers and ignored the joy of the Palestinian people," said Samer Hameto, a longtime journalist with the daily official newspaper Al Hayat Al Jadida. Khalil al Sheik, from the independent, pro-Palestinian Authority daily Al Ayyam, agreed: "Foreign journalists did not fulfill their role. They covered disengagement from the Israeli perspective only." Hameto was plain-spoken about the cause: "We were all scared," he said. "The most important reason was the case of the French journalist. It affected us all." Three masked gunmen in Gaza kidnapped Mohammed Ouathi, a soundman for France 3 television, just two days before Israeli security forces moved to oust recalcitrant settlers and intensive media coverage began. "The foreigners were intimidated and returned to the Israeli side," said Bilar Salem, director of the news agency The Palestinian Independent Center for Media Services. "It was a very bad result." Palestinian journalists, for their part, Salem noted, faced attacks from the government, the armed factions, and the people: "It's the most difficult work in the world."

13. (C) Al Sheik also said the lopsided coverage showed "the government does not know how to deal with foreign media." Salem noted that the Palestinian National Authority ran two rival media centers, one sponsored by Interior Minister Yousef, one sponsored by Civil Affairs Minister Dahlan, who compete for power in Gaza. "I went to the big reception for all the journalists given by Dahlan's center," he twinkled. "It was very nice, and Abu Mazen (President Abbas) gave his speech there."

14. (C) The trio criticized the work of Palestinian journalists as well. Hameto pointed out that Israeli military and police forces decided in advance to forbid Palestinian journalists access to the settlements - a move protested by the International Federation of Journalists - which limited the types of stories they could produce. Pessimistic, Palestinian writers focused too much on official statements and the current story, and not enough on the future, said Hameto. "Journalists here are not independent," said Salem, and the media lack accuracy as a result. I can hear three local radio stations in my neighborhood, he said, one underwritten by HAMAS, one by Fatah, one by Islamic Jihad. After the municipal elections, the HAMAS station said HAMAS won, the Fatah station said Fatah won. "I switched them both off!"

(NOTE: According to NGO media watchdogs such as Reporters Without Borders, the GOI, other than banning access for Palestinian journalists, did not harass Palestinian media workers during disengagement operations. The PNA, which on July 20 announced that journalists would face "penalties" if they "deal with or handle any type of statements or publications that touch on internal events and carry between their line words that slander, libel or harm others," did not take any other actions targeting disengagement media coverage. END NOTE.)

15. (C) The best story I wrote, said Hameto, was interviews of Gazans whose homes are next to the settlements. "They described how they lived in fear, under fire, and now they are free." He usually covers economic issues, and was also pleased with his work on how disengagement could reduce unemployment and decrease poverty by restoring freedom of movement, and on Israeli -Palestinian coordination. Al Sheik liked best a story on how municipal governments are planning to pave the workers' paths to the settlements into proper roads. Another favorite piece covered the many small peaceful celebrations, which al Sheik believed international media ignored in favor of familiar images of masked men waving guns.

16. (C) These working journalists wanted to increase the independence of Palestinian media, and saw activism, diversity

in media outlets, and English language skills as possible approaches. "We protested the case of the French journalist," said Hameto, and maybe it will not happen again. Al Sheik noted that, over the past decade, the Internet and other new technologies have brought competition to Palestinian journalism. "This is a good thing." Even the highly partisan local radio stations are progress, said Salem, and the press is slowly becoming "more free." Salem, who runs his agency on the pricey fees he charges diplomatic missions for a daily English newsletter, said "the real problem is money." He favors training more Palestinian journalists to write in English, to use the Internet to publish, and to adopt neutral vocabulary: "neither terrorists or martyrs."

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